

Algerian Defense Minister General Khalid Nezzar: Memoirs

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General Khalid Nezzar is a controversial figure in Algerian politics. To some he saved the nation from sliding into the abyss of religious radical governance. He is credited with starting the Algerian Civil War after he nullified the 1991 elections in which the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique de Salut [FIS]*) was posed to win. Although Nezzar's human rights record is highly controversial, this does not discount his intimate knowledge of and involvement with the military aspects of bringing independence to Algeria.

While visiting Algiers in 2003, I picked up one of Nezzar's memoirs. The book, *Battle Stories*, published in Arabic, offers Nezzar's recollections of the Algerian War of Independence that lasted from 1954 to 1962. The long, grueling war caused the mutiny of the French Foreign Legion units whose mission was to retain Algeria as a French colony.

Nezzar gives readers insight into the organization and tactical thought of Algerian guerrilla and conventional warfare. This book and Nezzar's 1999 memoir are important works of military history available to Arab readers. Nezzar's books are also accessible in French.

The National Liberation Front

Today, the warring factions in Algeria are the ruling National Liberation Front (*Front de Liberation Nationale [FLN]*), the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupements Islamique Armé [GIA]*), and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat [GSPC]*), which is closely linked to al-Qaeda. These militant groups consist of Algerians reared on the stories and tactics of the Algerian War for Independence.

Nezzar's memoirs give us an understanding of the terrain, tactics, and evolution of combat capabilities of guerrilla movements in Algeria. The book offers lessons in how French Armed Forces dealt with terror tactics and guerrilla warfare in the past and how these lessons might be applicable today. For example, Osama

bin-Laden studied terrorist groups and successful insurgency movements, particularly those of Arab liberation, and he counts the GIA as part of his declared World Muslim Front.

Nezzar has recently been the subject of a 2002 court case in which he was charged with torture and inhumane treatment of his enemies. Former Algerian army officer Habib Souaidia's book, *The Dirty War (La Sale Guerre)*, published in French, accuses Nezzar of torture, extrajudicial killings, and for prolonging the state of emergency. According to the "Executive Summary for Algeria Under Politics," in *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—North Africa* (on-line at <www4.Janes.com>), ultimate power in Algeria is thought to be in the hands of five generals, one of whom is Nezzar. Nezzar's memoirs might offer insight into his motivations for not wanting to see Algeria lapse into religious radicalism.

Early FLN members were a cell of disgruntled officers of the French Auxillary Forces and Foreign Legion. Before beginning the independence movement in 1954 this cell focused on recruiting and studying military topics useful to insurgency movements, including demolitions training and mine and countermine warfare. In essence, the French Armed Forces helped train early FLN organizers.

In many ways, Nezzar's account is reminiscent of the story of U.S. Special Forces Sergeant Ali Mohammed, who in the early 1990s provided al-Qaeda with valuable training manuals that formed the basis of their jihad encyclopedia and operations manuals. Amazingly, Mohammed traveled to Afghanistan to train Islamic militants while on active duty in the U.S. military and without the knowledge of his chain of command. He also used skills learned in the U.S. Army to "case" U.S. embassies in Dar-el-Salam and Nairobi.

Nezzar's memoirs also examine the FLN's early organization and strategic goals. Nezzar writes that a committee formed the National Revolu-

tionary Council (*Conseil National de la Revolution Algerienne [CNRA]*), which included military men who had fought for France in Indochina and during World War II. The CNRA was FLN's political organ. In 1959, the CNRA formed a military committee in an effort to merge political and military aspects of the guerrilla war and attacks within Algerian cities. Nezzar outlined the following strategies for the military committee:

- To destroy electric fences the French had erected to keep FLN units from infiltrating the Algerian border.
- To recruit personnel to the FLN.
- To conduct operations and military strikes to disrupt the economy.
- To expand the conflict out of the cities to include the Sahara regions where regular French units could be divided and harassed.
- To conduct military operations and guerrilla strikes on French soil.
- To develop leadership within the movement.

Nezzar mentions the importance of logistics bases in Tunis, Libya, and Morocco. He also mentions the importance of Egyptian President Gamal Abdul-Nasser, who provided funds, training, and most important, the Voice of the Arabs radio station that provided Arab nationalist solidarity propaganda. The nations also sponsored meetings for FLN leaders to discuss strategy. The Revolutionary Command Council met every three months to reevaluate its course and to change the direction of hostilities alternating between guerrilla and conventional tactics. The chiefs of every organized unit of the ALN attended meetings.

Of the nations that supported the FLN, Nezzar credits Tunis with providing safe havens for refugees. The movement of those refugees offered the perfect mechanism for transporting supplies and fighters across borders. Nezzar also reveals that Tunisia's restriction against allowing pursuing French army units to cross the Tunisian border gave the FLN a chance to use the border to target

French Army units, then withdraw to hit them again. This allowed them to know the exact locations where units would stop to try to direct and concentrate fire.

A Maginot Solution?

In response to terror tactics in Algeria's major cities, which included assassinations of French police, civil servants, and military personnel, the French erected electronic fences across Algeria's borders and around towns and villages. Nezzar describes how the electronic fence was interspersed with guard posts, mines, and a rapid heliborne response force. French tanks, artillery batteries, and mobile radar units reinforced the fence. Named the Morice Line after French Defense Minister André Morice, the fence was enhanced with motion-detecting tripwires.

Nezzar details the challenges of penetrating the Morice Line and the ALF guerrilla tactics of attacking one area of the line as a diversion while amassing forces to overrun a smaller garrison or watchtower elsewhere. Nezzar writes that careful reconnaissance by Algerians sympathetic to the independence movement carefully watched the deployment of French fighter-bombers and helicopters in major coastal airports. The sympathizers gave the FLN important information with which to assess whether diversions had succeeded.

A few FLN fighters were veterans of Diem Bien Phu and understood that to force the French to withdraw, the FLN had to inflict massive losses. Nezzar calculated that French casualties reached 350,000 with 39,000 dead, which proved to be the limit to France's will to fight.

Nezzar discusses other key factors, such as the ALN's methods of gathering information. The movement monitored newspapers, paying particular attention to French casualty lists. The ALN acquired skills to conduct reconnaissance from the sea, and it developed specialized units to penetrate the Morice Line and to clear mines. Diversionary attacks were made to allow sappers and wirecutters time to penetrate electrified fences. The ALN also took great

care in selecting key terrain, not just for ambush but to monitor French military convoys, command post activity, and roads. Ever mindful of helicopters, the ALN made great efforts to track all French military air assets based in Algeria.

The French wanted to win battles with overwhelming force and would meet 60 FLN guerrillas with the same pattern of tanks; command and control helicopters; and trucks carrying infantry as they would have if they were confronting a larger force. The FLN discovered the pattern of French attacks and using the terrain and the time of their own choosing, summoned overwhelming force. Their objective was to inflict casualties then withdraw to fight in another location. Or, they would lure French forces to the Tunisian border, knowing the French would stop at certain locations where they would be met with mortar fire. These tactics were the same as those Vietnamese General Giap used against French forces in Indochina and later against U.S. forces in Vietnam.

FLN conventional units consisted of infantry, 82-millimeter (mm) mortar, and 57-mm cannons. The FLN took care to assign French-trained veterans to volunteers new to combat. By the end of the war in 1962, the FLN had armed and equipped 25 regiments.

Analysis and Criticism

Nezzar's description of actual battles focuses on the emotional aspects of the fight and lacks any real tactical detail. What I gleaned from the two chapters in which FLN units engaged French forces is that before hostilities began the Algerians had planned both the attack and the avenues of retreat.

The book lacks a topographical map, which would have helped readers understand the terrain and unit locations. I also criticize Nezzar's romanticization of the conflict. The Algerian war of independence was ruthless. The cafe wars alone killed 5,000 civilians. French civilian vigilante units, called rat hunters (*ratonnades*), targeted Arabs and alienated the local population. Also, the book does not mention the French policy of *regroupement*, which resettled two

million Algerians into squalid camps. Nevertheless, this book is important and should be of interest to counterterrorism and foreign area officers.

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